DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 177 246 UD 019 799

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TITLE Urban Adolescents' Assessments of the Political System's Performance.
SPONS AGENCY Yale Univ., New Haven, Conn.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 22p.; Paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, California, April 8-12, 1979); For a related document see UD 019 798

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Demography; *High School Students; *Political Attitudes; *Political Socialization; *Politics; Secondary Education; Student Alienation; *Student Attitudes; Student Characteristics; Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

In a May 1976 study of 269 Hartford, Connecticut high school students, four fundamental questions were investigated. First, what is the source of responsibility for the present state of the political system? Second, using a four-dimensional attributional scheme to measure such responsibility, what is the underlying structure of such attributed responsibility? Third, what are the categoric-demographic effects on such attributions of responsibility? Fourth, what are the attitudinal antecedents of such responsibility attributions? The findings of this study are discussed within the context of extant research on attribution processes and the implications of these findings for the educational system are considered. (Author)

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URBAN ADOLESCENTS' ASSESSMENTS OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM'S PERFORMANCE

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Prepared for delivery at the 1979 Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association, San Francisco Hilton Hotel, San Francisco, California, 8-12 April.

The assistance of the students and teachers in the Hartford, Connecticut Public School System in the completion of this research is gratefully acknowledged. Financial support for this research was provided by the Political Science Department. Political Psychology Program and University Computer Center, Yale University.

UD019799

ABSTRACT

In a May 1976 study of 269 Hartford, Connecticut high school students, four fundamental questions were investigated. First, what is the source of responsibility for the present state of the political system? Second, using a four-dimensional attributional scheme to measure such responsibility, what is the underlying structure of such attributed responsibility? Third, what are the categoric-demographic effects on such attributions of responsibility? Fourth, what are the attitudinal antecedents of such responsibility attributions? The findings of this study are discussed within the context of extant research on attribution processes and the implications of these findings for the educational system are considered.

Urban Adolescents' Assessments of the Political System's Performance

Contemporary American adolescents exhibit relatively high levels of alienation from the political system. Feelings of political powerlessness and political distrust are particularly high among adolescents, having increased steadily over the past decade (Abramson, 1972). Furthermore, levels of political alienation appear only marginally affected by demographic factors, such as socioeconomic status, race, or sex (Long, et al., 1976). While considerable attention has been directed toward these feelings of political disaffection among preadults, very little research has investigated adolescents' perceptions of the current state of the sociopolitical system. Thus, whereas adolescents' political feelings have been amply studied, their assessments of the reasons for the system's failure have not been typically researched.

Of special interest in this context is the attribution of responsibility for the present state of the political system; furthermore, the question of motivation is also of concern here. Does the system's present condition result from the actions of leaders or nonleaders? And is their behavior intentional or unintentional? This scheme leads to four possible assessments: 1) the system's present state results from the intentional actions of leaders, 2) the system's present state results from the unintentional actions of leaders, 3) the system's present state results from the intentional actions of nonleaders, or 4) the system's present state results from the unintentional actions of nonleaders.

Using this four-dimensional attributional scheme, four objectives have been set for this paper. First, adolescents' attributional assessments on

these four dimensions will be described. Second, the underlying structure of these four attributional dimensions will be explored. Third, the effects of demographic-categoric factors on these attributions will be investigated. Last, possible attitudinal antecedents of such attributions will be ascertained.

Related Research. Social psychologists assume that people manifest a need to understand, predict, and control their environment (Heider, 1958; Jones and Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967). Furthermore, they also assume that one means by which the individual can satisfy this need is through the process of psychological attribution. Finally, theory and research on the attributional process suggest that two fundamental dimensions are involved in assessing responsibility: personal factors and environmental factors (Hastorf, et al., 1970).

Experimental research on psychological attribution has led to a number of generalizations in this area. First, behavior is usually viewed as being internally caused when the effect of the environment is perceived as being weak (Jones and Nisbett, 1971). Second, if an individual is seen as possessing high ability and motivation levels, his behavior is typically viewed as being intentional or internally caused (Sulzer, 1971). Third, in perceiving an act as being internally caused, an individual's ability level is usually considered more important than is his motivation level (Jones, et al., 1968). Fourth, individuals are typically held more responsible for negative than for positive outcomes (Jones and Aronson, 1973; Landy and Aronson, 1969; Shaw, 1967; Shaw and Sulzer, 1964; Sulzer and Burglass, 1968; Walster, 1966). Fifth, different levels of responsibility for an act are commonly attributed to an individual, depending on a number of variables inherent to the situation (Sulzer, 1971).

Sixth, an observer's attribution for an act is dependent on hedonistic relevance, or personal consequences of that act, for him (Jones and David, 1965). Seventh, many attributions exhibit a personalistic component, inasmuch as the observer is involved in the situation which is being perceived and evaluated (Jones and Davis, 1965). Eighth, pluralistic ignorance often leads the individual to assume that others hold similar attributions when, in fact, they may not (Kelley, 1967). Finally, if the situation being perceived holds a possible threat for the individual, or if a particular attribution might result in a threat for the individual, the person may protect himself by the belief in a just world or other defensive attributions for negative consequences (Lerner, 1966; Shaver, 1970). Given the general salience of the political world for people, many of these factors may apply to the present study.

Only one recent study is directly relevant to this research (Long, 1976c). In this study of university students' attributions for systemic failure, intentional behavior of political leaders was found to be most frequently cited. Demographic effects on such political attributions were minimal. All four dimensions of attribution were highly intercorrelated, although the students did make a basic distinction between unintentional and intentional nonleader behavior as factors in the failure of the political system. Feelings of political alienation were also found to correlate with all four attributional dimensions.

Sample. Data for this research were collected by means of a written questionnaire, which was self-administered by a random sample of 269 students enrolled in two public, inner-city high schools in Hartford, Connecticut in May 1976. All students were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity.

The sample was composed of more girls (64%) than boys (36%) and more nonwhites (56%) than whites (44%). By school year, 29 percent of the students were freshmen, 17 percent were sophomores, 26 percent were juniors, and 28 percent were seniors. A grade-point-averages were earned by 23 percent of the students, Bs by 53 percent, Cs by 22 percent, and Ds or Fs by 3 percent. Forty percent of the students' parents had grade school educations, 35 percent had graduated from high school, and 25 percent had attended or graduated from college.

Results. Nine-item indicators were utilized in this study to measure the four attributional dimensions under investigation. Preceding these 36 items, the following statement appeared: "Many people have complained about the way our political system works these days. In your opinion, how important is each of the following factors in accounting for the system's poor performance?" Six response options were provided, ranging from Very Unimportant to Very Important. In the following analysis, for heuristic purposes, the response distributions have been collapsed and only the Important response category is presented.

One of the major concerns in scale construction is the reliability or internal consistency of attitudinal measures. An item analysis of the four attributional indicators employed here indicates that all four constitute scales, in that they exhibit high levels of internal consistency. For example, the leader-intentional behavior scale achieves a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.84, the leader-unintentional behavior scale manifests an alpha of 0.77, the nonleader-intentional behavior scale attains an alpha of 0.83, and the nonleader-unintentional behavior scale exhibits an alpha of 0.80.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the Hartford students'

attributional responses in Table 1. First, with an average response of 73 percent importance across the 35 items, and a response range of 60 to 82 percent importance on the four attributional dimensions, it is apparent that the majority of these students are considerably dissatisfied with the functioning of the political system. Second, differences do appear regarding the four dimensions, with leader- and nonleader-intentional behavior being viewed as more important in accounting for the system's poor performance than leader- and nonleader-unintentional behavior. Therefore, for these students, intentional behavior, especially among political leaders, is the most important source of systemic disfunctioning today.

Also of interest are the response variances for each of the four measures, which range from 12 for both the leader- and nonleader-intentional behavior scales, 15 for the leader-unintentional behavior scale, to 19 for the nonleader-unintentional behavior scale. This suggests, first, that for these urban adolescents, there is greater agreement concerning the intentionality of leader and nonleader behavior; and second, that these adolescents are in less agreement concerning the effects of environmental factors on behavior, particularly for nonleaders.

The individual item distributions for the leader-intentional behavior scale indicate that, in this instance, adolescent perceptions of incompetence are more important than perceptions of corruption; similarly, for nonleaders, perceptions of ignorance seem more important than perceptions of disinterest or apathy in explaining the present state of the political system. When the two intentionality dimensions are considered, it is evident that the Hartford adolescents perceive misinformation and pressure groups as being more important than career motivation for leaders, whereas, for nonleaders, government harassment and persecution are viewed as less important than government

TABLE 1. REASONS FOR THE POLITICAL SYSTEM'S POOR PERFORMANCE

Leader Behavior-Internal Control	Important
The corruption of many politicians.	67.8%
Government leaders not caring about carrying out the wishes of most people.	73.5
Government leaders making costly mistakes and bad decisions.	75.5
Politicians representing special interests and being indifferent to the wishes of the majority of Americans.	76.6
Politicians being too concerned with advancing their own careers to represent the concerns of the man on the street.	76.6
Government leaders not trying to stop political corruption and dishonesty.	77.0
Political leaders being incapable of performing their jobs.	77.4
The dishoresty of political leaders.	78.6
Politicians being unqualified for the positions they hold.	80.3
Average Response	75.9
Leader Behavior-External Control	
Politicians acting the way they do because they believe they can never successfully fight the system.	63.4%
Government leaders knowing that to get ahead, they must never criticize the government or try to change it for the better.	70.0
The complexity of the government leading public officials to lose touch with the American people.	71.5
Public officials knowing that if they do not follow the wishes of powerful political groups, their careers will be ruined.	71.5
Involvement in the political system leading political leaders to hold different values and priorities than the people they represent.	72.4
Politicians making bad decisions because the government lies to them.	72.7
Because the government provides them with incorrect information, public officials being ignorant of what the people really want them to do.	76.6
Powerful groups and government agencies misrepresenting the wishes of the people to political leaders.	77.5
Powerful groups encouraging politicians to ignore what most people want the government to do.	78.7
Average Response	72.7

TABLE 1. (Continued)

Mass Behavior-Internal Control	Important
The people being disinterested in politics and public affairs.	69.9%
The people not really knowing how to influence the government.	70.4
The people thinking that the affairs of government are not important to them personally.	70.5
The people thinking that political corruption is a normal state of affairs which cannot be changed.	70.9
People assuming that all politicians are corrupt, and not really caring about them.	71.8
People not understanding how the government influences their lives.	73.8
The people accepting high levels of dishonesty among public officials.	74.0
People not understanding how the government really works.	80.1
The people being uninformed about politics and public affairs.	81.6
Average Response	73.7

Mass Behavior-External Control	
People not participating more in politics for fear the government may harass and punish them.	60.3%
Citizens acting the way they do because they are afraid of the government.	66.4
The government persecuting people who criticize it or try to make it more democratic.	66.9
The political system encouraging people to believe in things which are bad for them.	69.8
People being ignorant about political matters because the government hides its activities from them.	70.7
The government trying to convince the American people that conditions in this country are better than they really are.	71.5
Citizens being uninformed about politics and public affairs because the government lies to them.	73.2
The government distracting the American people from seeing what is in their best political interest.	73.3
People not understanding more about public affairs because the government purposely confuses them.	79.3
Average Response	70.2

misinformation and prevarication. Thus, intentionality is perceived as more important than unintentionality in accounting for leader and nonleader behavior, and ineptness, misinformation, and ignorance are viewed as more important than intimidation in explaining both leader and nonleader behavior.

To what extent can these adolescents' responses on one attributional dimension be predicted from a knowledge of their responses on the other dimensions? Intercorrelations between the four scales show that these adolescents' perceptions are highly consistent, with associations ranging from 0.91 to0.97 and averaging 0.94 across the four scales. Thus, knowledge of one dimension typically furnishes accurate knowledge of other dimensions of attribution for systemic failure.

Given the very high intercorrelations between the four attributional measures, it is possible that, for the Hartford adolescents, less than four attributional dimensions are being tapped. The factor analysis results in Table 2 indicate that this is, in fact, the case. Two, rather than four, dimensions emerge from this analysis, the first of which accounts for ninety percent of the variance. Although considerable overlap appears between the two factors, especially for the two leader behavior scales, it is noteworthy that 12 of the eighteen nonleader behavior items receive high factor loadings on the first factor, whereas only 5 nonleader items load on the second factor. These findings suggest that these adolescents do not clearly distinguish between intentional and unintentional behavior for either leaders or nonleaders, that the adolescents' perceptions of leader behavior tend in some instances to coincide with perceptions of nonleader behavior, and that the adolescents can contrast, to a certain extent, nonleader behavior. Moreover, these Hartford students evidently place greater weight on nonleader behavior in accounting for the present state of the political system than on

TABLE 2. PRINCIPAL COMPONENTS ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL ATTRIBUTION ITEMS

	Factor 1	Factor 2	h^2
Leader Behavior-Internal Control			
Item 1	-0.06	0.66*	0.38
Item 2	-0.01	0.52*	0.27
Item 3	-0.03	0.66*	0.41
Item 4	0.22	0.41*	0.35
Item 5	0.47*	0.29	0.49
Item 6	0.34	0.40	0.47
Item 7	0.34	0.39	0.44
Item 8	0.64*	0.06	0.46
Item 9	0.44*	0.20	0.36
Leader Behavior-External Control			
Item 1	0.11	0.35*	0.19
Item 2	0.18	0.31*	0.20
Item 3	-0.10	0.66*	0.36
Item 4	0.26	0.44*	0.43
Item 5	0.45*	0.02	0.21
Item 6	0.55*	0.16	0.46
Item 7	0.60*	-0.05	0.33
Item 8	0.61*	-0.08	0.32
Item 9	0.51*	0.18	0.42
Mass Behavior-Internal Control			
Item 1	0.24	0.39*	0.33
Item 2	0.48*	0.12	0.33
Item 3	0.16	0.49*	0.37
Item 4	0.54*	0.07	0.34
Item 5	0.36	0.30	0.38
Item 6	0.62*	0.02	0.41
Item 7	0.64*	-0.02	0.40
Item 8	0.57*	0.11	0.42
Item 9	0.52*	0.06	0.31
Mass Behavior-External Control			
Item 1	0.40*	0.21	0.32
Item 2	0.17	0.32*	0.20
Item 3	0.01	0.60*	0.36
Item 4	0.26	0.39*	0.36
Item 5	0.53*	0.08	0.35
Item 6	0.71*	-0.15	0.38
Item 7	0.68*	-0.14	0.35
Item 8	0.62*	0.08	0.46
Item 9	0.38*	0.19	0.40
Eigenvalue	11.96	1.07	
Percentage of Variance	91.8	8.2	

* Highest factor loading

leader behavior.

To what degree do the adolescents' personal characteristics influence their perceptions of responsibility for the system's poor performance? The regression coefficients in Table 3 show that, with one exception, such characteristics have little effect. The exception if grade-point-average, here construed as an indicator of general sophistication, which is positively related to both perceived leader and nonleader responsibility. In other words, the higher students' grade-point-averages, or sophistication, the more they attribute responsibility for systemic failure equally to leaders and nonleaders. It must be emphasized, however, that this particular variable exerts only a small impact on perceptions of leader and nonleader responsibility.

Inasmuch as the adolescents' personal characteristics had a minimal effect on their perceptions of responsibility for the present state of the political system, a second, perhaps more salient, set of variables will be investigated. In this instance, the influence of seven indicators of socio-political orientation on political attribution processes will be studied: 1) perceptions of general live satisfaction and gratification (Long, 1977b), 2) feelings of personal threat from the political system (Long, 1977c), 3) feelings of self-esteem and personal control (Long, 1977e), 4) personal and political irrational thinking (Long, 1976a), 5) critical perceptions of the sociopolitical system's functioning (Long, 1977a; Long, 1977d), 6) feelings of alienation from the political system (Long, 1976b), and 7) attitudes of political violence justification to effect change (Long, 1975).

How might these seven measures relate to political attribution? Perceptions of life satisfaction might be negatively related to perceptions of both leader and nonleader responsibility for the system's poor performance. Feelings of political threat might be associated with attributions of leader

TABLE 3. DEMOGRAPHIC-CATEGORIC VARIABLES REGRESSED ON POLITICAL ATTRIBUTION COMPOSITE INDICATORS

	Mass Behavior	Leader Behavior
Sex	-0.04	-0.09
Race	0.03	0.05
Grade Level	0.13	0.09
Socioeconomic Status	-0.07	-0.08
Grade-Point-Average	0.21*	0.23*
r^2	0.06	0.06

* Standardized regression coefficient greater than twice its standard error.

responsibility. Feelings of personal competence might correlate with perceptions of leader responsibility. Irrational thinking might contribute to attributions of nonleader responsibility. Critical perceptions of sociopolitical reality might be associated with attributions of leader responsibility. Feelings of political alienation might correlate with leader responsibility attributions. And political violence justification might also be related to perceptions of leader responsibility for the system's condition. Furthermore, sociopolitical sophistication, as measured by student grade-point-average, might further contribute to these hypothesized relationships.

The data pertinent to these predictions appear in Table 4, where the attribution scales have been combined into leader and nonleader indices and controls have been introduced for grade-point-average. Overall, the results of this multiple regression analysis show that this set of sociopolitical orientation indicators has a greater effect on political attributions, especially of leader responsibility, than do the students' personal characteristics. Furthermore, this effect results primarily from two variables, feelings of political threat or reactance and political violence justification. Moreover, differences do appear in these relationships when controls for grade-point-average are instituted.

A number of more specific generalizations can be drawn from these statistics. First, feelings of threat from the political system seem especially related to attributions of leader behavior, even more so as sophistication declines. Second, among the less sophisticated adolescents, as political violence justification for reform increases, attributions of both nonleader and leader responsibility for the state of the political system declines. For this group, such an association, particularly as it involves leader behavior, might suggest that this type of unconventional

TABLE 4. SOCIOPOLITICAL ORIENTATION INDICATORS REGRESSED ON POLITICAL ATTRIBUTION COMPOSITE INDICATORS FOR LOW AND HIGH GRADE-POINT-AVERAGE STUDENTS

	Mass Behavior		Leader Behavior	
	Low GPA	High GPA	Low GPA	High GPA
Life Satisfaction	0.08	0.08	-0.04	0.07
Political Reactance	0.20	0.18*	0.30*	0.20*
Personal Competence	-0.06	0.07	-0.03	0.16*
Irrationality	0.16	0.05	0.10	0.10
Reality Perceptions	0.07	0.07	-0.09	0.08
Political Alienation	-0.16	0.16	-0.06	0.14
Political Violence Justification	-0.27*	-0.12	-0.37*	-0.08
r^2	0.16	0.13	0.24	0.16

* Unstandardized regression coefficient greater than twice its standard error.

behavior is basically futile. It is also significant that only among the high GPA group do feelings of self-competence lead to perceptions of leader responsibility for systemic disfunctioning. Finally, it must also be pointed out that the life satisfaction, irrationality, reality perceptions, and political alienation measures were unassociated with the attributional measures.

Discussion. Five general conclusions result from this study of Hartford adolescents' perceptions of responsibility for the poor performance of the political system at the present time. First, political dissatisfaction among this group is relatively high. Second, in attributing responsibility, these adolescents place greater stress on intentional, rather than unintentional, behavior, particularly among political leaders. Third, in conceptualizing responsibility for the system's state, these adolescents tend to possess a more distinct view of nonleader behavior, as compared to leader behavior. Fourth, only grade-point-average serves as a predictor of adolescents' political attributions, with perceptions of leader and nonleader responsibility being higher among more sophisticated students. Last, both feelings of personal threat from the political system and political violence justification to effect reform relate to attributions of political responsibility; in the first case, with a positive relation between the two factors, and, in the second case, with a negative association between the two factors, but only for low-GPA students.

What are the implications of these findings, particularly as they relate to the educational system? Educators place great emphasis on the inculcation of traditional American values in their students. Moreover, the educational system attempts to instill the citizenship norms of obedience, loyalty,

respect, and conventional forms of political participation (Patterson, 1960). Secondary school students typically are enrolled in curricula which are leader-oriented, descriptive, and which focus on political institutions (Committee on Pre-Collegiate Education, 1971). Many of these factors conflict with the findings reported here, making it difficult for the educational system either to meet its traditional citizenship goals or to adequately cope with the political attitudes held by students. Furthermore, the educational system is faced with a contradictory situation when attempting to contribute to the political socialization of contemporary adolescents, first, because it is not equipped to deal with the more critical orientations exhibited by students; and, second, because if it were to attempt to contend with adolescents' political perspectives, it might well reinforce their estrangement from and contempt for the political system and its leaders--an eventuality which would probably be unacceptable to many educators. Meanwhile, by avoiding such a critical approach to sociopolitical realities, the educational system does not alleviate the "problem" of student political disaffection, and by encouraging a more traditional, status quo-oriented approach to the sociopolitical system, the educational system only exacerbates the political disaffection among contemporary youth. Finally, by either avoiding the dilemma entirely or by attempting more traditional modes of instruction, the system does not provide the students with a solution to their "problem." Thus, having been taught more conventional models of political involvement and more subservient orientations toward the political system, students are not effectively prepared to cope with a changing sociopolitical system, in which traditional models of citizenship no longer apply (Verba, 1967). This last point is especially salient, since the results of this research indicate that most of these students hold themselves at least partially responsible for the

declining state of the political system.

Do the findings reported here corroborate earlier research on attribution processes? In line with earlier findings, behavior was more typically viewed as being internally, i.e., intentionally, caused, whether it was the behavior of leaders or nonleaders. Both leaders and nonleaders seemed to be perceived as possessing high ability and motivation levels, as well, another factor fostering perceptions of intentionality. Given the rather negative evaluation attached to the subject matter investigated, it must be assumed that both leaders and nonleaders are held responsible for the decline of the political system. It is of interest that although the hedonistic relevance factor certainly must apply to adolescents' attributions of responsibility, they typically hold themselves responsible for the political system's present state. Similarly, a considerable degree of personalism is also encompassed in the adolescents' attributions of responsibility, but, here, too, they hold themselves generally to account. Since near consensus exists among these students concerning the levels of responsibility for the declining state of the political system, it must be concluded that the notion of pluralistic ignorance probably does not apply in this instance, or, if it does, the evidence is so overwhelming that others' political perspectives are not particularly salient. Finally, although it might be expected that defensive attributions would have been appropriate here, they do not seem to have occurred. These findings lead to the conclusion that these Hartford adolescents manifest rather high levels of sociopolitical sophistication and perspicacity. Whether the American educational system can further develop such attributes, so that contemporary adolescents can more effectively participate in the political system, is an empirical question warranting further investigation.

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